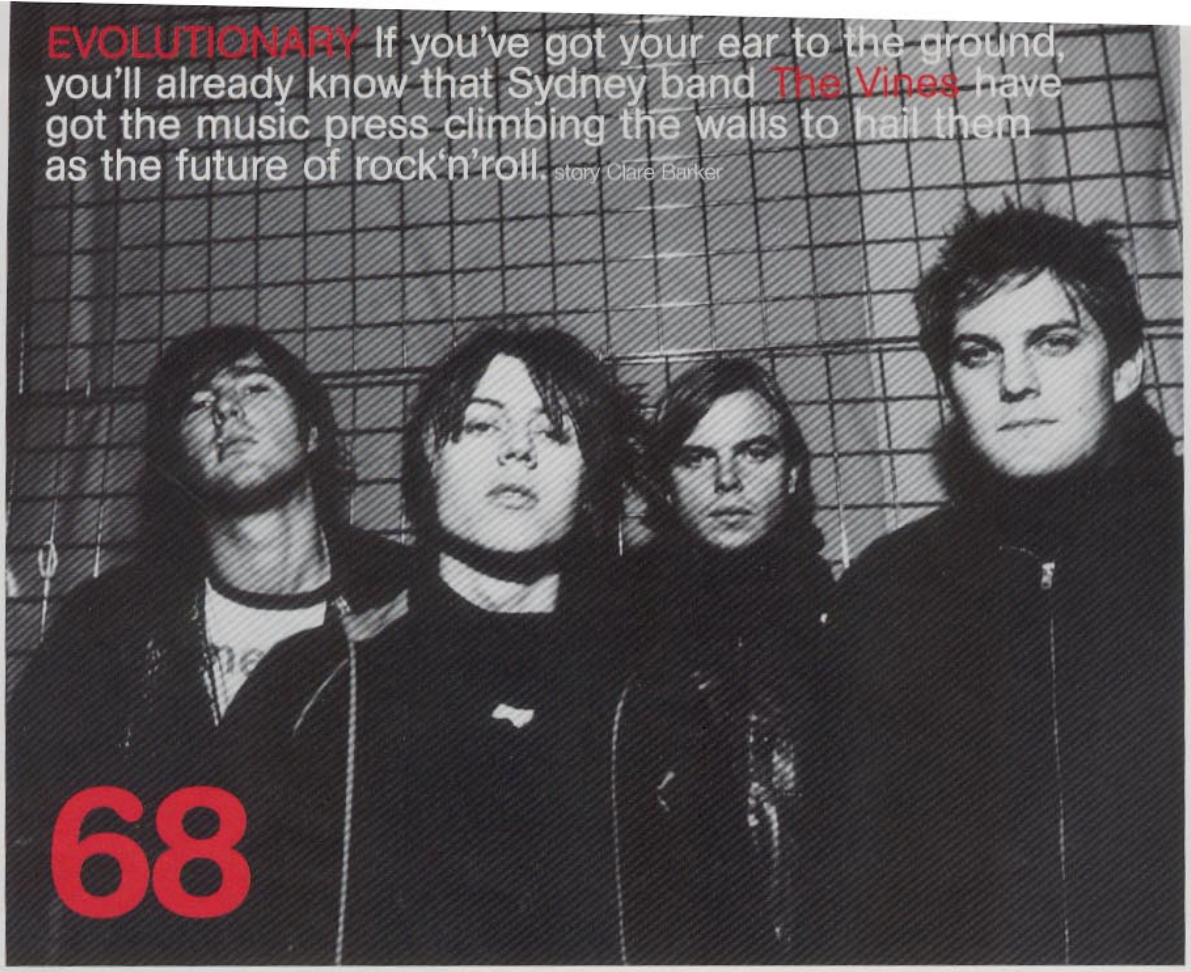

EVOLUTIONARY If you've got your ear to the ground, you'll already know that Sydney band The Vines have got the music press climbing the walls to hail them as the future of rock'n'roll. story Clare Barker

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Barely a month goes by without the fickle British music press heralding the arrival of the latest, greatest, white hope for the future of rock'n'roll. The current incumbent is a four-piece hailing from neither downtown New York nor some bleak English industrial city but from suburban Sydney. Touted as Australia's answer to The Strokes, The Vines have been hyped to within an inch of their perilously short public lives. They have been likened to a nascent Nirvana and mentioned in the same sentence as both Pixies and The Beatles. So, understandably, it pains me to say it but they really are quite good.

The Vines' debut long player, *Highly Evolved*, references Sound Garden, The Who and even The Kinks. But, above all, it's raw and loud and it feels like they mean it. The band is fronted by the fiercely unstable Craig Nicholls, whose live performance features a disturbing catalogue of aesthetic crimes. On stage, 24-year-old Nicholls sweats profusely, rolling his eyes into the back of his head and intermittently covering his face with his hands. He is backed by the considerably more restrained trio of bass player Patrick Matthews, guitarist Ryan Griffiths and drummer Hamish Rosser.

"Craig gets so carried away, he really controls the crowd," says 26-year-old Matthews. "For us, to get the break at the beginning took Craig to develop a stage show, to release all his inhibitions and carry on like he always could in band practice."

That stage show was a long time coming. The Vines, with original drummer David Olliffe, spent five years playing in Matthews' bedroom for an audience of none. Olliffe and Matthews met at high school, where they bonded over a shared admiration for the Stone Roses. Shortly afterwards, if the hype is to be believed, rock'n'roll history was written in the South Hurstville McDonald's, where Matthews and Nicholls worked together, discussing the finer points of Kurt Cobain's songwriting in their lunch breaks. Eventually, they turned their backs on fast food and embarked on university careers — Nicholls to study art and Matthews medicine — before concluding that academic life did not suit either of them.

"You could say we were both a bit dissatisfied," concedes Matthews, who was easily tempted to swap the acoustic guitar he had been playing since he was 12 for a bass and join Nicholls and Olliffe in an early version of The Vines. Five years later, Nicholls had written a catalogue of more than 30 songs, which the band had duly rehearsed and fine-tuned. However, The Vines had played only a handful of live shows. They were virtual unknowns. "We did play every now and then but it was really hard to get a gig," admits Matthews.

While Sydneysiders remained entirely oblivious to the 'future of rock'n'roll' jamming away in their proverbial backyard, The Vines had designs on London. They were signed to a local label after the results of a bedroom recording session were played on community radio and Ryan Griffiths came in on second guitar. "Our manager told us, 'Don't bust your guts playing live in Sydney. Wait until you've made the record and see what happens'," recalls Matthews. They sent their demo to the London home of the White Stripes. XL Recordings released *Factory*, the Kinks-infused anthem to workaday drudgery, as a seven-inch single and the publicity machine kicked in. The Vines were signed to Capitol in the United States and recorded the album, *Highly Evolved*, in Los Angeles. Somewhere along the way, Rosser replaced Olliffe on drums, perhaps temporarily. Then in January this year, The Vines played a set at London's Camden Monarch, the very same venue that initiated the chaos surrounding New York rockers The Strokes a year earlier.

"It was just playing for a bunch of journalists," says Matthews, without a hint of irony. "It was fine. We get more enthusiastic crowds elsewhere. Our managers did mention to us that it was exciting," he adds, sounding more somnolent than thrilled. "They try to tell us things are important and try to inspire us. They said the Camden show was where the cognoscenti would be."

Highly Evolved is both blisteringly loud and well-crafted and Nicholls exudes the tough energy of an early Tim Rodgers from fellow Australian band You Am I, with a healthy dose of Cobain hysteria thrown in. However, perhaps it is the studied indifference of the band to the hype that surrounds them that signifies The Vines' star quality. Apathy and sheer unadulterated arrogance are core rock'n'roll values, sadly missing among the crop of PR-friendly pop stars dominating the airwaves in recent years. Where was the young Mick Jagger when you needed him, posturing and thrusting and claiming he couldn't give a Mars Bar what the establishment thinks of his music? Where was Johnny Rotten?

"I don't know if The Strokes were everything [the media] expected them to be," says Matthews. "A band has to really change the world to make them happy, like the Sex Pistols did. That's the sort of band they want. I think they should give up searching. A band is just a band. If we make a good record, some people will like it. There is never going to be another Sex Pistols."

Not that The Vines care.

"We don't think about it too much," admits Matthews. "I suppose the timing was good for us, in terms of the sort of music we play. And possibly, the days of building a big live following are over. I've heard The Strokes say they conquered New York before the record [*Is This It*] was released. I'm not sure how true that is. I guess I deny the reality of it most of the time. It's all just make-believe. It's not a real thing. You make up a record and people respond to the made-up part of your life, the record part. You're not trying to make people like the real you. It's very confusing putting yourself up for judgement and it's not good for the soul. You can get confused and lost. That's why a lot of bands drink a lot. It helps you sleep at night."

The Vines' debut album Highly Evolved is out now on Engine Room.